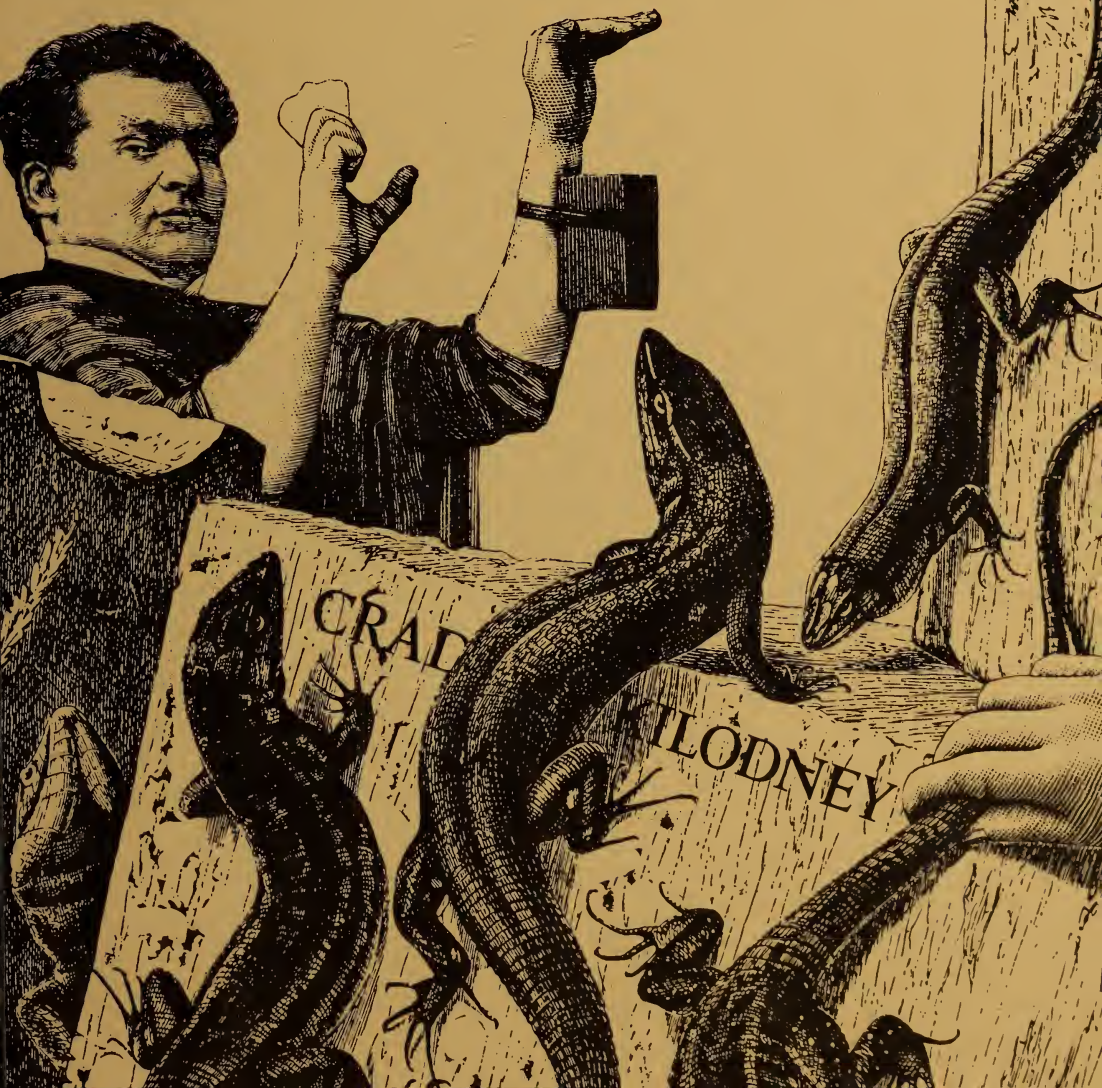


INCURABLE TRUCKS & SPEEDING DISEASES



INCURABLE TRUCKS & SPEEDING DISEASES

Stories by

CRAD KILODNEY

To William Kaplan,

Crad Kilodney

CHARNEL HOUSE

Toronto, Canada

Also by Crad Kilodney

Mental Cases (Lowlands Review, 1978)
World Under Anaesthesia (Charnel House, 1979)
Gainfully Employed In Limbo (Charnel House, 1980)
Lightning Struck My Dick (Virgo Press, 1980)
Human Secrets -- Book One (Charnel House, 1981)
Human Secrets -- Book Two (Charnel House, 1982)
Sex Slaves of the Astro-Mutants (Charnel House, 1982)
Terminal Ward (Charnel House, 1983)
Pork College (Coach House Press, 1984)
Bang Heads Here, Suffering Bastards (Charnel House, 1984)
The Orange Book (Charnel House, 1984)
The Blue Book (Charnel House, 1985)
The Green Book (Charnel House, 1985)
The Scarlet Book (Charnel House, 1985)
The Yellow Book (Charnel House, 1985)
Cathy (Charnel House, 1985)
Simple Stories For Idiots (Charnel House, 1986)
Foul Pus From Dead Dogs (Charnel House, 1986)

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HOT LINE

RRRING!

"Hello, Distress Hot Line. This is Barry speaking. What's your name?...Charlie? I got a cousin in Cleveland named Charlie, but everyone calls him Chuck. So how are you tonight, Chuck?...All right, Charlie, Chuck, same thing. So how do you feel tonight, Charlie?...Not so good, eh? I'll tell you something. This city is filled with people like you, people in all walks of life, young, old, you name it, but they've all got one thing in common. No matter how bad off they think they are, no matter what they're going through, what they really all basically want is someone to talk to, someone trained to understand. Like me, I majored in psych in junior college. And one thing I learned about people who say they're going to kill themselves...Well, let me finish the point I was trying to make because it's a very relevant point. And that is that when anyone tells someone he's going to kill himself, that very act, that very act of telling someone shows that he doesn't really want to do it, just that he wants someone to hear him out. Never mind the circumstances of the problem, whether it's chicks, or family, or dope, or whatever, the point is that your calling me tonight, Chuck, proves that...all right, *Charlie*, whatever. It proves that you want to talk to me, not kill yourself. Now, if you're like most alleged suicides, you probably think your problems really are unusual, really much worse than the rest of the world around you, am I right?...I thought so...Let me...Let me...Let me just finish what I was saying. The point is that your problems are no different from other people's, only maybe you're just at a low bio-rhythm, heh, heh, or just, you know, at a vulnerable moment when your defenses are down. And here's the other part of the point I was trying to make, namely, that you're convinced you're at the end of your rope. I don't mean that literally, heh, heh. Kind of a bad joke, although I'll tell you, statistically suicide by hanging is the most common, followed by poisoning. And contrary to what a lot of people might think, wrist slashing usually fails because the person either doesn't cut deep enough or it takes too long and then he changes his mind...What?...Shooting? That's third, right

after poisoning, but let's not go into all that, it's too depressing. Anyway, the point is, Chuck...*Charlie*. I'll get it straight one of these times. The point is that you only *think* there's no one to turn to. But look, you're on the phone right now, right this instant, right? You're not killing yourself. It all goes back to...Just let me...Wait, okay, just...Just let me wind up what I was trying to get across to you. Uh...You made me lose my train of thought now. Hold it a minute...What's that?...You need to talk to someone. Of course. That follows logically. Why do you think we're in the phone book, to get crank calls? Of course not, although actually we do get quite a few, but from my training I know how to distinguish them within a matter of minutes. But like I was saying, your typical person in trouble may not be able to go to his friends, or maybe he doesn't have any. Or his teachers or minister or rabbi. The same goes for his co-workers, that is, if he has a job. And the family, too. I'll bet you feel you can't even talk to your family about this matter, whatever it is, right? Am I right?...Of course! I knew I was right. Or any of the other categories I mentioned, right? You don't have to tell me. It follows psychologically. So you turn to your last resort, which is someone like me, or whoever might happen to be on duty. Like usually we have a girl here, a really good head. She really knows how to get to the root of the problem. But that's neither here nor there. The point is...The point is...Just let me get this one last point across, Chuck, or Charlie. The point is that there's nothing new under the sun, as the saying goes. No matter how far out you think your problem is, there's been others who've gone through it. There's a way to work it out, or maybe it's just a matter of changing your orientation and seeing from another angle that it's really nothing at all. I'll give you a good example to illustrate the point I've just made...Just hold your horses, Chuck, because this example is very relevant. There was this case study I wrote a term paper on in my first-year psych course where this guy--"

BLAM!

"Chuck? Hey, what was that? Hey, Chuck? Chuck? *Oh, shit!*"

ULTRA-TECH

Excerpts From The Diary Of Dr. Fahd Bashibazouk

Introduction: An entirely new system of personal power has been discovered by Dr. Fahd Bashibazouk, former research scientist for the Hoover Company. He has named it Ultra-Tech. This discovery is the fulfillment of many months of secret research. Simply put, it is a new field of knowledge that allows the practitioner to gain the advantage in all situations involving the transfer of money, power, or love. The Ultra-Tech Man can overcome all his adversaries without any cost or risk to himself. He can even cheat while appearing honest.

The seed of this powerful new personal technology was first sown in Dr. Bashibazouk's study of simple games. (He is the author of a private monograph titled *How To Get Rich Playing Whist* and was at one time the unofficial Parcheesi champion of Turkey.) He soon realized that such games were merely an analog for life itself and that his winning techniques were merely the tip of the iceberg of a system of power that could be applied to any competitive situation. After immigrating to the United States and going to work for the Hoover Company, Dr. Bashibazouk continued to extend the horizons of this unbeatable and perhaps dangerous knowledge.

What follows is excerpts from Dr. Bashibazouk's diary, starting from the early phase of his research at Day Minus 545 down to Day Zero, when the Ultra-Tech Discovery was complete.

*

Day Minus 545: I can't stand it when they laugh at me! Those cretins in the warehouse abuse me all the time with their dirty names like "Fat-Ass Turk" and "Rat-Faced Geek." But today I got a measure of revenge. I cleaned them out at lunchtime playing my own version of poker called Turkish Poker. I loved the look on Ricardo's face when he realized that he had lost all his grocery money before the holiday

weekend and would have to face his wife and children as the stupid bum that he is. When he begged me for a loan, I refused.

I feel an addicting urge to dominate inferior people. I have invented a new word: "Ultra-cheating."

I fixed my toaster myself, thus saving at least \$10 for a repair. The local repairman is an Armenian. I love to go in and look at his second-hand appliances and ask for something I know he doesn't have.

Had an excellent bowel movement and also did ___ five times in three hours. My penis is definitely getting longer.

Day Minus 524: Ultra-cheating is something new -- something frightening. I'm astonished that I'm learning to acquire winning advantages. The stock boys refuse to play cards with me any more.

I found one of my tires flattened in the company parking lot and demanded that the company pay for its repair. They agreed. I also demanded that my personalized memo pads be reprinted owing to a misspelling ("Dr. Fart Bashibazouk"). I feel a new personal power emanating from me, from every organ in my body, especially my brain. I almost shudder to think how I could dominate my opponents so easily.

Phoned Kentucky Fried Chicken district office and made spurious complaint. Will get voucher for two free dinners. Voice control is a new aspect of Ultra-cheating.

Day Minus 502: Rosalinda, my Guatemalan housemaid, has asked me to help her obtain legal status. She fears being deported, along with her 12-year-old daughter. This presents interesting possibilities. I will purchase a Polaroid camera. Daughter has good breasts for her age. A lot of these Latin American types are unusually well developed by puberty.

Neighbor's dog continues to bark at me after a year in this house. Neighbor, a Greek greaseball named Pappas, says I'm the only one his dog barks at.

Day Minus 479: How did Fleming feel when he discovered penicillin? How did Walton feel when he invented linoleum? Now I know what it's like to rise above others. They called me crazy, but they're the crazy ones, not I! I had a dream that a map of the world unrolled from above a blackboard and

ULTRA-TECH

my name was on it in big letters. ***DR. FAHD BASHIBAZOUK***

Thanks to Ultra-cheating, I am receiving an extra \$30 on my pay check, and no one is the wiser. I simply work an alleged hour of overtime each week on the H-311 project.

I have convinced Rosalinda that I must borrow her daughter, Maria, in the evenings for scientific purposes. I have taken hundreds of photos of the girl. Maria was frightened at first, but I told her it was to make money for her mother to help me pay for an immigration lawyer, but if she told her mother I would have them both deported. The logical contradiction was, of course, lost on the girl. They are both afraid of me, that's what counts.

I have decided to wage psychic warfare on the neighbor's dog.

Day Minus 461: Is it wrong for the superior to take advantage of every situation? No! The moral superiority of my power system requires a new name. It is no longer to be called Ultra-cheating. It will be called Ultra-Tech.

Ultra-Tech facial expressions confound the unprepared. Smile when hearing something tragic. Frown when hearing a joke. Sometimes stare harshly in response to an innocent remark. One day make eye contact at all times; the next day, no eye contact at all. When my assistant, Charles, asked me about a football game, I hit him with Olbers's Paradox: if the number of stars in the Universe is infinite, why is the night sky dark? Later, when he asked me a scientific question, I asked him if he knew how to fry an egg. The slightly mad, evil grin renders the inferior person helpless. Am trying it on Pappas's dog. No luck yet but will continue.

Drake, the Supervisor, doesn't like me. He may be saying things about me to management. He will be ELIMINATED! He is an epileptic. This will help.

Day Minus 450: Have been calling Supervisor's home phone every night around 2 a.m., interrupting his sleep. I hang up after a few rings. He has become a nervous wreck. A normally reserved but nervous man, Drake is supposed to avoid excitement for the sake of his health. I finally induced a seizure today. I baited him into losing his temper when he saw that my notes for H-311 were in Turkish.

Tricked stupid sales clerk at Seven-Eleven into giving

me more change than she owed me. She was alone in the store at the time.

All my internal organs are well-tuned. Having excellent bowel movements. I can feel Nature and the Universe flowing through me. The expulsion of my feces is like rocket propulsion, shooting me upwards to command the stars.

Day Minus 429: While walking along the street, I stopped to examine street vendor's jewelry. Extremely cold, windy day. Almost no business, she complained. Jewed her down \$2 on a ring.

Greek neighbor asked me if I knew why his dog was sick. I professed complete ignorance. (Real cause: poisoned marsh-mallow'!.) Made anonymous complaint about his restaurant to Health Dept. Will cost him plenty!

Without a doubt, Ultra-Tech is an invisible arsenal against which my enemies are helpless. Given time, the Ultra-Tech Man could rule the world. Ultra-Tech power principles meet two criteria: (1) easy to execute, and (2) not vulnerable to detection. I'm beginning to realize that many of the most powerful men in the world have used certain Ultra-Tech methods without recognizing them as such. Such people include heads of state, teenage idols, religious leaders, psychiatrists, TV celebrities, bankers, environmentalists, and, of course, Jews.

Drake on leave of absence, ha, ha.

Day Minus 399: Drake has been fired, first day back after leave of absence. Planted particularly obscene photo of Maria in his desk and arranged for it to be found. His grand mal seizure was a pathetic sight. I am VICTORIOUS!

On way home, I challenged man in wheelchair to try to cross in front of my car. I fixed him with a deadly stare, frightening him out of his wits. He yielded to me.

Have discovered techniques of reusing postage stamps and doctoring bus transfers to allow me free rides.

Day Minus 312: Is not the meat-eating man destined to rule the world? In the future, will not the strong and intelligent eat the weak and stupid? Does not the dam suckling its calf demonstrate the persistence of obsession to dominate? My thoughts move faster than I can write them down. My

brain is a powerful missile piercing the stratosphere to challenge God. Ha, there is no God! Bashibazouk is God!

Award-winning bowel movement today. Did ____ five times in two hours. Penis up to 5.95.

Some ingenious poses of Maria in the cellar (mother out on errand). I have become a true artist at this. A company in Holland is interested in buying my photos.

Hoover Company is a waste of my talents. They are all inferior idiots.

Got one of the stockboys fired by baiting him into performing a trick with the forklift. He used to call me "Arab asshole," even though Turks are not Arabs.

Day Minus 271: Have received sizable sum of money from Dutch firm for photos. Rosalinda finally found out the truth. I reassured her this sort of thing was perfectly normal in Holland, also that the money would be used to help her with her immigration problems. Rosalinda also asked for minimum wage. (She is learning to read the newspapers evidently.) I refused and made her feel guilty for asking. "Do you not enjoy the shelter of my home?" I said to her.

Avoided paying gardener's bill (long overdue) by presenting ruined remains of "rare flower" mistaken for a weed by his helper. I even threatened to sue. Gardener said I was a pain in the ass and I could find another gardener.

Day Minus 270: Found 50-pound bag of sheep manure cut open with contents piled up at my front door. Carefully repacked it and took it across the street and persuaded the old widow to buy it for \$10 (she loves gardening). She was hesitant, but I told her she had a fine figure for a woman of her age.

Day Minus 180: I feel an accelerating pull towards power as I continually discover new ways to apply my knowledge of Ultra-Tech. Got queer office boy fired after inventing incident in washroom. The ordinary person is no match for the Ultra-Tech Man.

Greek lady in accounting had little birthday party. I got two pieces of cake by being charming to her. She got a hair dryer for a gift. I didn't contribute anything towards it.

Day Minus 141: Found way to tamper with phone bill punch card so as to cause computer to give me a large credit. It worked! Electric bill next.

Ultra-Tech goes light-years beyond all other systems for success. I can control any situation.

Got paper boy to deduct 25¢ from bill for paper delivered past my deadline. Threatened to call his supervisor. No tip either. Paper boy is son of Armenian store owner.

Neighbor's dog now runs when I approach. VICTORY!!

Day Minus 77: Have been dismissed from Hoover. They claimed my PhD. was phony. I produced diploma from North Hollywood Technical University. Unfortunately, school has since gone out of business, so I could not contact them for official transcript. But Ultra-Tech has the last word: I doctored the design for H-311 very slightly in such a way that the motor will explode. No way of tracing this to me until I'm long gone, maybe not at all.

Maria now has pretty good breasts. A virtual slave to me. Rosalinda bedridden with possible fractured leg, which I have attempted to treat myself. Don't want any doctors in the house.

Day Zero: I now know the full meaning of the Ultra-Tech Discovery and its power. All will bow down to ME, DR. FAHD BASHIBAZOUK. Truly great days are coming.

Called home from pay phone and pretended to be immigration officer. Rosalinda in a state of panic and total submission to my will. Maria a real gold mine for me. Dutch publisher wild about latest photos. Have increased price.

*

Epilogue: Dr. Fahd Bashibazouk now lives rent-free at government expense in the lovely town of Leavenworth, Kansas. Readers wishing a copy of his book, *Ultra-Tech: The Ultimate Personal Power System*, should send \$50 (cash only) to P.O. Box 281, Station S, Toronto, Canada M5M 4L7 (U.S. currency okay).

PUNISHMENT SUBWAY

Excerpt from press release: "On July 1st, 1996, the Toronto Transit Commission begins service on its new, fully-automated Sheppard Avenue subway line. The 'PMI' train is the first automated train in the world that is programmed for moral indignation...."

"STAND CLEAR OF THE DOORS....WOULD YOU LET THEM OFF THE TRAIN FIRST, PLEASE....DO NOT BLOCK THE DOORWAYS...DO NOT ATTEMPT TO BOARD THE TRAIN WHILE PASSENGERS ARE GETTING OUTMAKE WAY FOR THOSE GETTING OFF THE TRAIN....I'M LOSING MY PATIENCE....STAND CLEAR OF THE DOORS OR ELSE....VIOLATIONVIOLATION....ALERT P-TWO MODE....BEEP."

As the undisciplined crowd jammed the doorways while passengers were still trying to get off, the electronic cameras on the upper corners of each doorway relayed their information to the Central Computer. Within seconds, jets of No-Name Short-Range Nerve Gas (packed for the T.T.C. by Sunfresh, Ltd.) shot out from the gas guns at the miscreants on the platform. They fell dead in an instant. When the ceiling fans had properly ventilated the station, the passengers disembarked and the crowd of survivors got on.

"THE DOORS ARE CLOSING....THE DOORS ARE CLOSING....DO NOT STAND IN THE DOORWAY....IT IS AGAINST THE RULES TO STAND AGAINST THE DOOR....YOU IN THE BLUE JACKET, TAKE A SEAT.... CAN'T YOU READ THE SIGNS?"

But the man in the blue jacket wasn't paying attention because he was too stoned. Besides, he was used to standing by the doors.

"VIOLATION....P-THREE-SEVEN SUB PARA TWO....BEEP...." Steel needles stuck out from the panel against which he was leaning. They were aimed at his legs. There was a shriek of pain.

In the corner seat reserved for the handicapped sat a girl with a shopping bag from Capezio reading a fashion magazine -- a well-dressed and very stupid girl who was definitely not handicapped. At least, *not yet*.

PUNISHMENT SUBWAY

"P-TWENTY-ONE....CENTRAL....DIRECT....BEEP....CORNER SEAT OCCUPANT, PLEASE MOVE OR ELSE....I'LL GIVE YOU FIVE SECONDS, YOU AIRHEAD BITCH."

But the girl was too engrossed in an article titled "How To Make Your Nails Speak For You" to realize her crime. Suddenly, the seat folded up violently, breaking her hip. She fell to the floor, screaming in pain. Of course, no one paid much attention. Good Torontonians mind their own business. Besides, Central Computer knows what's best.

Elsewhere, two greaseballs sat talking in a loud voice about a mutual female acquaintance. Their profanity was picked up by the microphones. "BRRRP....BRRRP....PING....VERBAL INDEX P, TOLERANCE THRESHOLD TEN PER MIN....ALERT....VIOLATION....BEEP....TWO-SIXTEEN-NINER....MALE PASSENGERS BELOW THIS SPEAKER, WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE....WARNING."

"Yeah? Fuck you, muthafucka!"

"Ha! Ha! Yeah, fuck you, assho--OH!" Two telescoping steel shafts burst through the panel behind them and pierced the greasers in the back. Then the ends of the shafts spread in a fantail of hooks inside their bodies. There was a very short utterance of pain, and then the victims collapsed against their seats, eyes open in paralyzed shock as blood spurted from their mouths.

The electronic sensors then picked up two black kids with a stereo tape player playing moronic music. No earphones, of course. "BYLAW VIOLATION....WARNING....WARNING....MUSICAL DEVICE WITHOUT EARPHONES....TURN OFF DEVICE AT ONCE OR USE EARPHONES....YOUR MUSIC IS GARBAGE....B-SEVEN-FIVER....CENTRAL....DIRECT....PASSING N THRESHOLD....ACTIVATE....BEEP BEEP....FIVE SECONDS....YOU DUMB SPOOKS BETTER TURN THAT SHIT BOX OFF...."

The black kids were vaguely aware that they were being spoken to. They looked at each other in puzzlement. "Hey, wuzzat?" said one of them.

"I dunno. Izzat fo' us?" his friend replied.

Across the aisle, a businessman reading a *Financial Post* smirked behind his paper and thought, *Kill the stupid niggers!*

"TWO SECONDS....ONE SECOND....UNHAPPY MODE....ACTIVATE...." Two little nozzles came out of the ceiling and blasted the boys with lasers so precise they didn't even scorch the poster behind them for Catholic Family Services.

PUNISHMENT SUBWAY

Two long-haired tough guys from the suburbs of Detroit found this very amusing until the sensors located them.
"ALERT....SYSTEM THREE-NINER....BEEP....TAKE DIRTY SHOES OFF SEAT....AND NO SMOKING."

"It ain't lit!" said the one trying to hide his cigarette in his cupped hand.

"SENSORS INDICATE SMOKE....DEFINITE TOBACCO TYPE.... LUCKY STRIKE, IF I'M NOT MISTAKEN....EXTINGUISH AT ONCE.... AND TELL YOUR FRIEND I'LL CHOP HIS FEET OFF IF I HAVE TO WARN HIM AGAIN."

"Oh, yeah? Well, we're from Dee-troit, U.S.A., and if you touch us you'll be sorry!"

"REFER JURISDICTION....CONFIRM AGREEMENT....1988 TREATYSECTION THREE, PARA FOUR....WARNING....BEEP....WE HAVE AUTHORITY ON THIS TRANSIT SYSTEM....DON'T PUSH YOUR LUCK, YANKS....CIGARETTE OUT AND FEET DOWN OR ELSE....ACTIVATE CONTROL SYSTEMS FOUR-SEVEN AND FIVE-SEVEN....BEEP....VERY UNHAPPY COMCON....SET FOUR-SEVEN FIVE-SEVEN....FINAL WARNING."

The two Americans looked around their seats for booby traps but could see nothing. The one with the cigarette exclaimed, "Blue Jays suck! And so do the Maple Le--" Two little electrodes came out from the back of his seat and caught him in a powerful arc of electricity. The lights in the car flickered for a moment. Then a thin, razor-sharp blade whipped out of the space between the seats and sliced the other fellow's legs off just below the knees.

"MEMO....CLEANING CREW ALERT....CAR THREE-ONE-EIGHT-SEVEN....FILE....NIGHT SHIFT....BEEP....RECORDED....KEELE STREET NEXT STOP....NEXT STOP IS KEELE STATION....DO NOT LEAVE LITTER BEHIND....BEEP....FAT GIRL READING HARLEQUIN ROMANCE, DO NOT WEDGE POTATO CHIP BAG BESIDE SEAT....VIOLATION....REPEAT....TAKE THAT LITTER WITH YOU, YOU CONSUMER OF JUNK....BEEP....ALERT....INDEX NINE-ZERO-ZERO....MINOR INFRACT....WARNING....KEELE STREET STATION....I TOLD YOU NOT TO LEAVE THAT BAG THERE, YOU IMBECILE....HOLD....PASSENGER ALERT....FAST TRI-VEX HITLER MODE NINE-ZERO-ONE STAND BY...."

The fat girl headed for the doors, expecting to get away unpunished, but a floor panel opened beneath her, and she fell through it and into the Biodegradable Hydrolator, a recent invention of Harmoney Disposal Resources of Downsview. Just what happened to her, you don't want to know. The panel

closed.

"THIS IS KEELE STATION....DISEMBARK IN AN ORDERLY FASH-
ION....HAVE A NICE DAY....PLATFORM PASSENGERS, STAND CLEAR
OF THE DOORS....LET THEM OFF THE TRAIN FIRST....MAKE ROOM
FOR EXITING PASSENGERS....WILL YOU LET THEM OFF, FOR CHRIST'S
SAKE....WARNING....I'M LOSING MY PATIENCE...."

NIGHT BARBER

Morris K. Jessup, the Night Barber, has his shop on a little side street in an old and shabby section of your city. The shop is so inconspicuous as to be nearly invisible. You have to go down an alley and through a plain wooden door that is unmarked except for the faded letters of his name. The building is run-down and looks abandoned, and the door looks as though it has been stuck for years. The little light fixture over the door contains a yellow 10-watt bulb. It goes on when Mr. Jessup opens, but as he is never seen to enter or exit through the door, one may suppose that he remains inside at all times.

Mr. Jessup is open for business promptly at midnight every night. A few customers are likely to be waiting quietly outside the door, and during the wee hours of the morning a few more may arrive. He caters to a select clientele that like him and trust him. Through the confidential whispers of his regulars, new customers learn about him and come to him. His is a business that requires no advertising.

An elderly, white-haired man with glasses, Mr. Jessup greets his first customers every night with a sweet smile, a little bow of old-fashioned courtesy, and the words, "Hello. Please do come in." They are led a short distance into a well-lit shop with a single barber's chair and a half dozen chairs for those waiting their turn. In most respects it is entirely conventional, except for the lack of windows and the unusual assortment of reading matter -- owner's manuals for products that are no longer made, old newspapers in foreign languages, old school yearbooks, religious leaflets picked up on the street, one volume of *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia* from 1940, several old statistical abstracts from the government, a scientific monograph titled *Poisonous Insects and Arthropods*, and a water-damaged book of surrealist paintings. You will not find any of the popular magazines commonly found in barber shops or waiting rooms.

At midnight on a mild summer night, the light over the door went on, and Morris K. Jessup greeted three of his

regulars who were waiting for him -- Lawrence, Earl, and Wilma. "Hello. Please do come in," he said, and then he led them inside.

With an exaggerated flourish of the fresh white sheet, Mr. Jessup said, "All right. Who'll be first?"

The three customers looked at each other self-consciously. Mr. Jessup usually relieved this moment of tension by making the choice himself. "How about you, Lawrence?"

Lawrence sat down in the chair, smiling like a child. He was a thin man in his thirties with intense brown eyes and black hair. He moved his fingers nervously and twiddled a Mickey Mouse ring on his left pinkie.

Mr. Jessup adjusted his glasses and looked at Lawrence's hair. "I guess we just need a bit of a trim this time, eh?"

"Yes!" said Lawrence, still smiling. "Whatever! Any kind of haircut!"

Mr. Jessup chuckled, picked up his comb and scissors, and began to cut. Lawrence grinned at the sight of himself in the mirror, and then after a minute or so he said, "*Ring, ring,*" without moving his lips. "*Ring, ring,*" he said again. "Mr. Jessup, I think it's the phone. I think it may be for me."

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Jessup, pulling open a drawer and taking out a toy telephone. He placed it in Lawrence's lap, and Lawrence picked it up.

"Hello?....Yes....Blavoon!" he exclaimed happily. "Blavoon, the Wonder Otter!...Yes, I'm so happy to hear from you again!..." His fingers twitched rapidly as he spoke. The Night Barber merely went on with his work. "...You have surprised the children!?!...Aha!...You swam under them in the river and chewed off their toes? That's wonderful!...Yes, that'll teach them to be so...so...d-d-disobedient!...The blood was warm and sweet, and they screamed and screamed!... You're smarter than a shark and have a real sense of moralsYou did what?...Oh, but of course!...Oh, the flashing teeth, the gleaming eyes, you do it all for me because I can't swim....They called me crazy. They didn't know I had a friend, Blavoony-oony, my pal, my buddy....Human meat, ha, ha!...Eating and--what?...Oh, I know, it's such a wicked planet....It wasn't like that with Adam and Eve....Stupid cranes and vegetables all falling across the sky!...If I could only put those children in a sandwich....I read one

time in a book how you could do it....It happened in AfricaNo, they don't believe, they're so wicked....Oh, Blavoon, you are the very best otter in the world!...Yes, I'm so glad that I'm the one you call, no one else....I love to hear your good news....What?...Oh, she got away, did she?" Lawrence frowned at this point. "But you can get her next time she goes swimming...." He lowered his voice. "....And you can chew off her breasts. She's a bad girl. She loves to go swimming naked....I think she should be taught a lesson." He smiled again. "Yes, the river is so deceptive and dark and mysterious. You can hide under a log or a rock....No, they can never shoot you, Blavoon. You can see them if they come with their guns and hide, yes, yes, yes...."

And the Night Barber worked steadily without hurrying. He shaved Lawrence's sideburns and put some of his favorite hair tonic, *Jeris*, on his hair.

"...Blavoon, I've got to go now....Yes, I'm almost doneBut you'll call me again, won't you?...Yes, I will want to hear all the details of how you chewed her breasts and made her scream!...Yes, Blavoon, good-bye." He hung up.

Mr. Jessup unhooked the sheet from Lawrence's neck and brushed him off with a soft brush. "There. You look mighty fine, Lawrence."

"Yes, it's great, like always. Here you go, Mr. Jessup." And Lawrence handed the barber six dollars and left.

"Well, who'll be next?" said the Night Barber. "How about Wilma?"

Wilma smiled sweetly and stood up. She was a small woman in her late fifties with ridiculously heavy make-up. She spoke in a high-pitched, childlike voice that one would have taken as an affectation but which in her case was perfectly natural. "I want a shampoo, Mr. Jessup, and then take some off the back."

"Of course, Wilma. I know just how you like it. Let me get the stool." He brought a swivel stool into position for her, and he put a towel around her and leaned her head back over the sink.

"I have a new poem that is very true in every detail, Mr. Jessup," she said.

"Oh? I would very much like to hear it. What's it about?"

"It's about my life with Martin Bormann back when we

lived in Cincinnati," she replied in her childish voice. "I could've gone to Hollywood, you know, but Martin and I fell in love, and I had to hide him from the F.B.I."

"Oh, yes, I recall," said Mr. Jessup.

"It's true in every detail. *I want everyone to listen,*" she said emphatically for Earl's benefit.

*"Martin Bormann was my friend,
He wore a funny hat,
One day he grabbed the paper boy,
And beat him with a bat,
I loved him and adored him,
And called him Little Fatty,
We lived on Western Avenue,
In downtown Cincinnati..."*

The Night Barber proceeded with the shampoo without interrupting Wilma during her long recitation.

*"...Martin looked like Jesus,
He had such pretty eyes,
And when I rubbed his penis,
It grew to twice its size,
He liked my little doggie,
My doggie liked him, too,
They went out for walks together,
And my doggie made a poo..."*

Wilma raised her voice a little to be heard over Mr. Jessup's hair dryer.

*"...I used to press his underwear,
I used to shine his shoes,
And then he'd tell me stories,
About the evil Jews,
He had a lot of medals,
He saved from the Third Reich,
He enjoyed my buttered noodles,
And riding on a bike..."*

With Wilma now in the chair, Mr. Jessup snipped away here and there, although she didn't really need much of a cut at all.

*"...Our love was such an epic,
It could've made a movie,
When you got to know him,
You knew he was so groovy,
He liked to grow petunias,*

*He liked to cut the grass,
He showed me how to make a bomb,
And also poison gas..."*

The Night Barber added a few finishing touches and then applied some *Adorn* hair spray.

*"...He was a brave, old Nazi,
With character and style,
When I think back to those days,
I cannot help but smile."*

"There we are," said Mr. Jessup, "and may I say that was a lovely and charming poem."

"Thank you. I really could've been a famous actress because I can memorize ever so many lines. And I wouldn't need any cue cards."

"Yes, indeed."

"Martin Bormann was the best man I ever knew, Mr. Jessup, although you're my second-favorite."

"Thank you."

"I never told anyone else about him, and I only recite my poems for you because I know I can trust you and you like them....Oh, that's very nice. I look better than Marlena Dietrich. Here, Mr. Jessup." She handed him some money and then departed.

Earl now took his place in the chair. He was a big man with curly red hair. He had a serious expression and spoke in a formal tone, his eyes directed straight ahead at his own reflection in the mirror. "I have learned certain facts about Lee Harvey Oswald. It may well be that I will be killed for what I know."

"Oh, now don't say that, Earl," said Mr. Jessup soothingly, as he adjusted the sheet around Earl's neck.

"In case I am killed, I wish you to know the relevant facts. And I want a good haircut so as to look important and credible if my picture appears in the newspapers."

"Of course, but I'm sure you won't be killed." The Night Barber began to cut.

"Lee Harvey Oswald was literally a robot-assassin programmed to kill by a small electrode that had been planted in his ear. The electrode responded to a radio signal which would make audible inside Oswald's head certain electronic commands to which he had already been hypnotically conditioned to respond. The commands told him to murder the

President -- any President, whoever was in office -- and meanwhile a group of criminal investors stood to make a billion dollars by manipulating the stock market on the day of the assassination...."

At this point, two more customers entered the shop -- one of Mr. Jessup's regulars and a lady he had never seen before. He nodded to them as they took their seats.

Earl continued: "...In the late nineteen-fifties, a small group of German and Argentine commodities merchants made the following calculations: the coincidence of the assassination of a President and a simultaneous scandal in the commodities market would then drive the stock market down at least thirty points. If a group had advance knowledge of this event and could sell short on a heavily financed scale, they could take a cash profit of up to a billion dollars...."

"Excuse me a moment, Earl. Do you want it across the ears or shorter?"

"Shorter. Very short. The cartel then got a foothold in two large corporations -- the Bunge Grain Company, headquartered in Argentina, and the Allied Oil Refining Company, headed by an ex-gangster named Tino De Angelis. While these two were manipulated to start a commodities crash, another branch of the cartel got involved with RHIC/EDOM -- technically, Radio Hypnotic Intra-Cerebral Control/Electronic Dissolution of Memory. In this technique, researched throughout the nineteen-fifties by both the C.I.A. and the K.G.B., the prospective assassin is first put into a deep hypnotic trance and programmed to go under again and to carry out specific instructions at the sound of a certain tone. Later, after the deed is complete, a chemical called acetylcholine breaks down the electrical impulses of memory for the time spent under trance...."

Mr. Jessup continued to cut Earl's hair and then applied some witch hazel to the back of his neck. Each regular had a set routine. Earl was very big on witch hazel but didn't care for talcum powder.

"...In nineteen-fifty-nine, Lee Harvey Oswald was contacted by a member of the cartel -- probably George de Mohrenschildt. Oswald was set up for a trip to Russia, where an underground associate in Minsk was scheduled to handle the hypnosis and implant the electrode. This was accomplished in nineteen-sixty-one, and shortly afterward Oswald

was returned to the U.S. It was never planned that the actual assassination would depend on Oswald's ability to handle a rifle, so back-up teams of marksmen were installed once a date was set. Jack Ruby was chosen to eliminate Oswald and was similarly hypnotized, but his memory dissolution was not perfect, so he was poisoned in prison. The ultimate profit to the cartel was estimated at half a billion dollars, along with certain political gains in South America."

"That's quite fascinating," said Mr. Jessup, holding up his hand mirror behind Earl's head. "How do you like it?"

"Excellent, Mr. Jessup, as usual." The barber unhooked the sheet and let Earl stand up. "The Conspiracy may not kill me after all, but it's better to be well-groomed just in case. Here you go." He handed Mr. Jessup the money and then left.

Mr. Jessup bowed slightly to the other two patrons.

"Hello, Alfred. Have you brought a friend with you?"

"Yes, Mr. Jessup. This here is Colleen, a neighbor of mine. I've been telling her all about you, and she said, 'I have to go to this Mr. Jessup.'"

"Well, that's very nice," said the Night Barber. "Why don't you sit in the chair, Colleen, and let's have a look at you. My, you're a pretty lass," he said to the pale-complexioned brunette with the large, watery eyes and long hair. She was in her late thirties and had a delicate and morose look about her.

Colleen took her place in the chair and pulled nervously on her long hair. "I would like a short haircut. I would like to look more like a man," she said shyly, eyes cast downward.

"Of course, my dear. Perhaps you'd like something along these lines." And he showed her a photo in a magazine. "It's very neat, and with the shape of your face I think it would be very appropriate."

The lady considered it for a moment. "Yes, I think that's very nice. Okay."

As Mr. Jessup went to work on Colleen, she closed her eyes and seemed to go into a state of introspection. Then she opened her eyes and looked sadly into the mirror, or perhaps an imaginary place far behind the mirror. She spoke softly, not to Mr. Jessup or even to her friend Alfred, but to someone unseen: "If you take me back I'll love it and

you'll like it, too. And every time I do another balmy or Irish thing, you'll have to wonder. I'll drop back on time's doorstep. But I'm no waif now. Right now I feel to the fullest the magical suspense. The magical suspense is human-ness. It is you who brought my form from out of chaos. This is the true denouement of our encounter. The better ending to the meeting -- dynamic, gay, both flattering and touching. I've said good-bye so many times to you and then come back. Driven by my troubledness and drawn to your soothing. How grim a little girl. Finding you was confirmation of the dream. I never meant to jerk you by my profusion onto land that even bordered on question. Never you or anybody. Grave Anna, the sweetly austere...." She closed her eyes momentarily. The barber went on with his work smoothly and with a minimum of noise. He addressed himself to Colleen's hair with a sensitive touch.

"...My love in itself is pure," she continued, eyes half-open as if drugged, her voice languid. "My love in the setting of world-as-it-is, is obscene. Till last month, almost since my life began, I've strolled through civil war. Between a Caspar Hauser heart and a Machiavelli mind, I had no peace. I needed order out of conflict. I am singing stars, and it is comic that to utter me is all of my salute to you. Most people achieve their philosophy and character without helling up a riot about it anywhere near so obstreperous, so conscious, and so noisy. I have to try. Because almost anybody can stand a sad denouement, but I cannot bow to a wrong one until I'm conquered. All the same I do maintain I am no lunatic...."

Colleen's long hair fell to the floor as the Night Barber, working with all his skill, reshaped her hair into a thing of neat, masculine beauty.

"...I have no sense of destiny. No vision of anything at all I may become. Listen while the ghost goes south. I think I've reached wisdom now, to harmonize the up-the-rebels whoop. You know, I always did feel great. To feel that is an exaltation that surpasses love. And it's a devil in the belfry and a bed of thornful roses underfoot. It's a faith and a latent devotion that looks down on fanaticism below. It is possessed and knows it, but it is not mad. It exults and is beautiful, not damned. I cried for you, and I thought this must be the final irony when you were shining light

vouchsafed to me, and by that light I saw the shadow of the profile of circumstances. It was a random dagger of your sending who lightly, idly, unknowingly performed a death of the heart...."

Mr. Jessup put down his scissors and comb and touched Colleen lightly on the shoulder. "I believe we're done now, my dear. Tell me if it pleases you."

The young woman opened her eyes fully and turned her head from left to right in consideration. "It's very nice," she replied softly. "I've a very good head of hair, don't you think?"

"I certainly do, my dear. It definitely becomes you."

He removed the sheet from around her neck, and she stood up slowly as if having awakened in a new body. She brushed away a few clippings from her arms, and he assisted her with his brush. "I feel much better now. I'm very glad I came to you," she said. She reached into her slacks and took out some money and handed it to him.

"Are you going to wait for me?" Alfred said to her.

"All right," she said. "I shouldn't walk home alone at this time of night." And she sat down again, clasped her hands on her lap, and looked serenely around the shop.

Alfred now took his place in the barber's chair. He was a somewhat fair-complexioned Negro with smooth, soft features. His hands were manicured, his clothing neat. He was in his mid-forties. "I'll have the usual, Mr. Jessup, and I should like to resume my account about the stinking smell that haunted me when I was younger."

"Of course," said the Night Barber, fixing the sheet around Alfred's neck.

"During the whole five years that the supernatural smell lasted, I never smelled it myself. But from the comments I heard, I had a fair idea what it was like. It was the smell of death and putrefaction. It carried a long way and could pass through every barrier, including glass windows. It came and went continually. When I worked in the shunting yards of Brent, South End, Harlesden, I could see passengers suddenly holding their noses as the trains passed on the main lines twenty yards away. And I would hear the Jamaican shunters muttering, 'Oh me bumba-cloth!' Eventually I realized that the whole of the British Railway and London Transport from Euston to Watford was talking about me...." He

paused for a moment and looked at Mr. Jessup painfully.

"Go on, I'm listening," said the barber with a look of sympathy.

Alfred resumed his strange story: "I was gravely distressed at having people turning against me everywhere I went. Where should I go to get rid of this thing? I knew no medical doctor could help me. I had a check-up and was pronounced completely healthy. I even tried various spiritual healers but only ended up being defrauded every time.

"At Ten Northcote Road, the taunting from the other tenants became an organized matter. Across the street there was a kindergarten, and the children there would take up the chant. Shopkeepers served me with grudging looks. Coming home at night after a twelve-hour shift, I had to fight against my tormentors for a few hours of rest. Then I would get up and ride the trains since I had a pass. Sometimes as I boarded a train there would be howls from one end of the train to the other. Passengers screamed insults. It was torture to be on public transport, but it was far worse staying at home. By the summer of nineteen-seventy I wanted to get home to Guyana as quick as possible because I thought there might be a healer who could really help me...."

"Tilt forward a bit," said the barber, as he began to work on the back of Alfred's head and neck. "That's fine." And the barber worked steadily as Alfred went on with his latest installment of a story whose resolution still had long to come.

"...I wondered if there was a ghost invoked to follow me and, if so, why and by whom? As I have said before, I never smelled this thing myself and only experienced it in the form of abuse and torment from others. One time I went to the swimming pool on Buckingham Palace Road, near the Victoria Station. People began to scream at me, 'Monster! Get out!'

"I finally was able to get a flight home in August of nineteen-seventy on B.W.I.A. The other passengers were Guyanese or Trinidadians going home for a month's vacation. Before long I heard them talking. 'He nah Trinidadian, he uh Guyanese.' And another would reply, 'No, he nah Guyanese, he uh Trinidadian.' There were lots of Guyanese whom I recognized, but they pretended not to know me. One of them said to his neighbor, 'Oh Lord, yuh got tuh see dis one to

believe. He dead!' This sort of thing went on until we got into Timehri Airport in Guyana...."

"You're all done, Alfred," said Mr. Jessup, holding the mirror behind Alfred's head.

"That's a very good job, Mr. Jessup." The barber undid the sheet, and Alfred stood up, took out his wallet, and paid him. "I have something extra to give you, Mr. Jessup, a sort of souvenir." He reached into another pocket and pulled out a small object wrapped in a napkin.

"Oh, what have we here?" said Mr. Jessup, smiling.

"It's a little rib bone from the fetus of a pig, Mr. Jessup. It was given to me in Guyana as a charm, but I finally concluded it had no powers in it. However, it's unusual, and I know you like unusual things."

"Why, thank you, Alfred. I'll add it to my collection."

"And next time, Mr. Jessup, I will tell you what happened when I got back to my home town in Guyana."

"I shall look forward to it," said the barber, smiling.

Alfred and Colleen walked out, and at that moment another customer entered the shop.

At 4 a.m., with the last customer served, Mr. Jessup locked his door and turned off the outside light. Then he went back into his shop and carefully swept up all the hair from the floor and deposited it in a plain plastic bucket. Turning off the light in the shop, he went up the dimly-lit staircase, carrying his bucket, and reached the top floor of the dilapidated six-story building. He opened the door to the roof and walked out. The city was peacefully asleep, except for a few moving lights on some roads. The air was hazy and smelled of the lake. The sky was cloudless, but not many stars could be seen. On the eastern horizon there was the first hint of the new dawn.

The Night Barber carried his bucket of hair clippings to a small barbecue stand and poured the hair into it. Then he took out a can of lighter fluid and squirted a few drops onto the pile of hair. He paused for a moment before lighting the match, taking a deep breath and invoking a secret oath or prayer which no one on earth had ever heard before. Then, with slow formality, he lit the pile of hair. It burned rapidly and gave off a pungent smell. The Night Barber leaned over it and inhaled deeply. His fingers began to

twitch and his face went through a series of contorted expressions. He raised his hands, looked up into the night sky, and began to utter peculiar syllables: "*Magaga-oh baroo-bah...ooma ooma...huzz-zuzz sneepa sneepa...arraka baka faka...oopa goopa coo-coo...*" And he began to snap his fingers and dance a weird little dance, turning around and around. The odorous vapors went up into the night air, mingling with molecules that existed since before life began. *Every night, my little plume of magic smoke!* the Night Barber thought. And as he uttered some more peculiar syllables, whose meaning, if any, was known only to himself, he looked toward the west. Another little fire could be seen far in the distance on the roof of a building much like his own, a fire that sent its own vapors into the night, that burned with a short, sweet, frantic brightness and then went out.

THE NEWSPAPERS

Irving Miller was in Bruno's buying a lettuce on sale for 78¢. This is cheap for Bruno's. As he carried his lettuce to the cashier, he was scowling unconsciously, for his mind was obsessed with one thought: would he ever be able to come in his wife's mouth? A few times he thought he had been close, and then his wife's jaw had gotten too stiff. Most of the time he never even got close. He did not want to go to his grave as the only married man in the world to be unable to come in his wife's mouth. You will agree that it is a miserable thing when a man can't even buy a lettuce at Bruno's without being haunted by such a thought.

When Irving put his lettuce on the counter, he was so preoccupied that he was not aware of having been charged 98¢ instead of 78¢. He accepted his two cents change and the plastic bag and was almost at the door when he stopped, thought a moment, and returned to the cashier. "You charged me ninety-eight for the lettuce!" he said angrily.

The cashier was startled. "Pardon me? Yes, ninety-eight," she replied.

"It's on sale for seventy-eight! There's a sign right there!"

"Oh, okay, don't shout. Here's your twenty cents." She shook her head in mild disgust.

The manager came up. "What's the problem?" He looked very virile and probably came in lots of women's mouths the first time, no problem.

"Your clerk deliberately overcharged me!"

"It was a mistake," said the clerk.

"We don't cheat our customers," said the manager.

"Like hell! I got overcharged last month on yogurt!" Two ladies giggled, and one repeated to her friend, "*Last month!*"

"Just cool it. You got the right change now?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, there's the door. I don't like people shouting in my store."

All the customers looked at Irving like he was crazy.

He could feel his cheeks glowing a hot pink. He walked briskly to the door, exclaimed, "Penguinhead!" and walked out. He didn't know exactly what "penguinhead" meant, but he had wanted to call someone that for a long time.

That evening at dinner, Irving's salad seemed to stick in his throat. It represented humiliation, and later he suffered from indigestion.

Irving had been getting worked up over things just as important as lettuce all during his adult life. He took umbrage at innocent remarks by strangers. He argued furiously with cretins over points of factual information. He called government agencies to complain about uncovered garbage outside of restaurants and public washrooms with no soap. He wrote hyperbolic letters to the newspaper that were never published, and so he refused to tip his paper boy. During a provincial election campaign he had a long argument with a canvasser for a fringe party that had no chance of electing their candidate anyway. He once scolded a temporary typist at work for correcting an alleged grammatical mistake in a letter he had dictated, and she stood up to him and proved she was right. He was completely impotent during the entire week she worked there.

Irving eventually developed a small ulcer and was advised by his doctor to calm down or find another job. When he got a new manager -- a woman -- he got into an argument with her over an apple that he had left in his desk drawer that may or may not have been eaten by one of the night cleaners. She called him "a bit of a nut," and he blew up at her and got himself fired. He decided he didn't like the company anyway.

So at the time of the lettuce incident, Irving was between jobs. His wife, Dolly, was in independent real estate agent who did excellent business and made plenty of money, so there was no problem there. She had told him to take it easy and find something when he was ready.

Dolly was a good, sympathetic, mild-mannered wife, conventional but not prudish in bed. She indulged her husband's nightly attempts to come in her mouth, and it got to be the normal routine that she would suck him until her jaw or neck got stiff, and then they would have ordinary sex. It was no big deal to her that he couldn't come in her mouth, but he took it as a nightly failure. Irving had had a few rela-

tionships before marriage, and it was the same story there, so he figured he must be sexually inadequate, at least in that one regard.

The night after the lettuce thing, Irving begged Dolly to try to hold out longer as she lay on top of him and tried to suck him. He thought if he could come just once, his entire life would instantly become happy. But then he thought of the manager in Bruno's and the pretty clerk who had tried to cheat him, and all the other little battles he had lost, and all these feelings got very mixed up until after a half hour or so, his wife pulled away from him, patted his thigh in a gesture of sympathy, and told him it didn't matter.

Now about those newspapers.

Every other Thursday the newspapers were picked up by a recycling company by arrangement with the municipal government. The crew had missed the previous pick-up for some reason. Irving had phoned to complain and was assured that the recycling company's truck would get to him on the next scheduled day. That was tomorrow. The bundle of papers was on the lawn at that moment. And if the crew didn't pick it up, Irving felt he would explode. He was one of the few people on the street who bothered to put out their newspapers for recycling, and he didn't like feeling like a nut for having a bundle of papers sitting on his lawn longer than necessary.

The truck might come at any time between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. So on Thursday, with Dolly out of the house, Irving waited impatiently. He tried to do some little chores, but his ears were tuned to the street and the expected sound of the truck.

By 3 p.m. the newspaper guys had still not arrived. Irving was nervous and irritable. *Not two pick-ups in a row!* he thought angrily. *They can't miss us twice!* He wondered what kind of social criminals the company had working for it.

Then his mind went back to the lettuce incident. This was a battle he replayed obsessively in his mind. Life was a series of little battles, and he had to win any that he could. If he couldn't come in his wife's mouth, maybe he could get even with Bruno's. Maybe if he got some satisfaction there it would help with the sex thing. It all had to do with pride or manliness or effectuality, and somewhere in the unwritten Book of Life he had a won-lost record to worry about. It wasn't exactly logical, but to Irving it had a

sort of logic. And now this waiting for the truck to pick up his papers -- another battle. So what could he do about it? He could go back to Bruno's, hang around outside, and bad-mouth the store to customers as they went in and out. Logic connected all of these things.

So Irving walked over to Bruno's under an utterly benign late-spring sky with chirping birds and new flowers in the wooden planters along the main street. (The litter that piled up in those planters during the winter months was another source of psychic pain to him.) And he stood near the entrance and said to people, "Don't shop here. They tried to cheat me on a lettuce," or "They're all crooks in there. You should try a reputable supermarket instead." No one took him seriously. They either smiled politely or frowned in annoyance and said, "I like it here," or "They're okay with me."

After a few minutes of this, the manager came out and said, "What's your problem?"

"I didn't like the way you tried to cheat me yesterday."

"Nobody tried to cheat you, so why don't you leave my customers alone."

"I'm going to make you very sorry you tried to cheat me. My name is Irving Miller. Remember that name."

"I will. Don't go away." And the manager went back inside. Irving waited for him to come back with reinforcements -- probably some rough characters who worked in the back room ripping up sides of beef with their switchblades. If they beat him up, he'd be a hero and could be proud of having defended a principle. He was sure there was some sort of principle involved. Then maybe his wife would have more respect for him even though he couldn't *do it*. She had never said a word against him, but he knew that deep down she must have a certain disdain for his lack of....Well, it was all very confusing, but there was a thread of logic there.

After a few minutes a police car pulled up. Irving was startled. The officer went inside, giving Irving only a brief passing look. A minute later, the officer and manager came out together. The officer asked Irving, "You want to tell me what this is all about?"

"Uh, it has to do with a head of lettuce. These people tried--"

"A lettuce?" said the officer. "You gotta be kidding."

"Well, you see, they tried to overcharge me and--"

"Listen, I have real work to do, not this bullshit," said the officer, annoyed, "so why don't you go home and forget all this."

"I can stand here if I want."

"No, you can't. You're on their property."

"These people tried to cheat me."

"Can you prove it?"

"Maybe I can't prove it, but--"

"I told you this guy was a nut," the manager said to the officer.

"You're the nut," said Irving.

"In what way am I a nut?" replied the manager.

The officer put up his hands to interrupt them. "Hold it. Now, I'm going to ask you to go home," he said to Irving. "I don't want to have to arrest you for trespassing and creating a disturbance."

"I'd like your hat number," said Irving uncertainly.

"Hat number?"

"I mean badge number. Whatever."

"Eleven-eighteen. Constable Blain, Thirty-Two Division."

Irving said to the manager, "I'll never shop here again."

"Thanks. I'd prefer that you didn't."

And Irving walked away. When he got home, he saw the bundle of papers still on his lawn, and he felt like slaughtering the entire city government for putting him through this unpleasantness. This was all adding up to yet another failure in bed tonight. Fate was imposing a very cruel logic on Irving -- namely, his own.

Six o'clock passed, and no newspaper pick-up.

At six-thirty Dolly came home from work. She was in a good mood.

"How'd it go today?"

"I closed a big one," she replied with a grin of satisfaction. "Let's go out and have a lobster."

So they went to The Old Mariner, where they picked their lobsters from the tank. Irving picked one that he thought was sneering at him. He asked to have it well-done because he wanted it to suffer. The waitress said a lobster shouldn't be overcooked or it would be tough.

That evening Irving took his newspapers off the lawn and put them behind the garage. The page on the top of the stack had a small headline that read: *Man Shoots Barber Over Bad Haircut*. Irving sympathized with the man. He often wished he had a gun. He remarked to his wife that the newspaper guys had missed them twice now, and he speculated that they were probably irresponsible kids who took dope or maybe lazy foreigners who slept on the job, and why didn't anyone respect the work ethic any more or have any feeling for a citizen's needs?

"It's no big deal," said Dolly. "Maybe they've discontinued the pick-ups because not enough people are putting their papers out."

"That's no excuse. Even if we're the only ones in the city, they have an obligation to pick them up!" he exclaimed.

"Take it easy. My goodness, of all the things to get upset over."

"It's the principle of it!"

"What principle?"

"What principle? The principle that I want my papers picked up!"

The unflappable Dolly shrugged the matter off as a trifle. Dolly almost never got worked up about anything, nor did she ever lose her temper. This was true of their sex life, too. She never showed impatience toward Irving. If he wanted her to suck him night after night without being able to come, that was okay. He met his basic obligations, and beyond that she didn't much care.

That night she lay on top of him as usual, and he tried with all his will power to keep stiff. "Slower...no, faster...wait a second...now go...squeeze harder...like that...watch the teeth...hold my balls with your left hand...ah, yes, that's fine...." But it wasn't fine enough to get him off.

Just as Dolly's jaw was giving out, there was a knock at the side door. It was around midnight.

"Jesus Christ! Who the hell could that be at this hour?" said Irving.

He put on his robe, went to the side entrance, and looked through the curtain of the door. He could vaguely see a man -- a strange man. He turned on the outside light.

"Miller? Miller residence?" the man said in a foreign

accent. He was a rough-looking character. Irving's first thought was that he was a hired tough from Bruno's.

"Yes?" said Irving, afraid.

"*You got newspapers for us?*"

"What?"

"*Open the door. I don't want to talk loud.*"

Irving thought of his wife and wondered whether he could protect her if the worst should happen. Summoning up all his courage, he reluctantly opened the door but kept the screen door locked. "What is it?"

"You got newspapers to be picked up?"

"Newspapers? At this hour?"

"I'm sorry about that. We missed you two weeks ago, and the supervisor left me a note about it because you complained. And then the truck broke down this morning and we didn't finish our rounds. So I thought we'd better come straight to the house, but I don't see no papers out there."

"No, I took them back and put them behind the garage."

"You want to show me? It's too dark to see."

"Yeah, okay. Wait, let me get a flashlight." Irving went half-way down the basement stairs and took his flashlight off a hook in the wall. Then he came back up, tied his bathrobe tighter, and stepped out into the driveway. He could see the truck in the street with a younger man sitting inside it smoking a cigarette.

He led the newspaper man toward the back yard and the little shed where he kept the garbage pails. "You picked a hell of a time to come. I'm a married man, you know," he said, as if to suggest that he enjoyed a good sex life and had been interrupted.

"Yeah? Heh, heh, I know what you mean!" The man made an obscene gesture with his middle finger going through a ring formed by his other hand.

"No, I don't mean that," said Irving defensively.

"That is, not exactly."

"Something else, eh? Heh, heh, that's okay, too."

"No, you don't understand. Anyway, never mind. Here are the papers."

"Whaddya mean, I don't understand? I'm a married man, too. Say, you mind if I take a leak? I'm dying for it."

"What, here?"

"Yeah, why not? I'll just do it behind here." He stood

behind the garage, opened his fly, and began to pee on a bare patch of ground. Irving didn't know where to aim the flashlight or where to look either, for that matter. "Tell your wife I'm sorry if we interrupted something."

"It's okay, it doesn't make any difference."

"Whaddya mean, it doesn't make any difference? Things not going right?"

"That's none of your business."

"Hey, no offense. I'm a man and you're a man, right? We can talk about these things, can't we?"

"No."

The man zipped himself up. "Ah, that's better. My name's John. What's your name?"

"Irving," said Irving automatically, although he did not mean to encourage any familiarity.

"Okay, good, so tell me, Irving, are things not exactly hunky-dory with the missus?"

Despite his resentment of the question, another part of Irving felt a need to gain a little sympathy, and so he replied vaguely, "Every marriage has its little problems. It's no big deal."

"So there *is* a problem, right? Come on, admit it." Irving wasn't used to indulging in sex talk. "Admit it," John persisted amiably.

"Possibly, but I don't think it concerns you, and I don't think you can help."

"Hey, I care enough to knock on your door late at night to make sure you get rid of your newspapers, right? Give me credit."

"Okay."

"So as long as I'm here, I shouldn't help out a customer who's having a little problem, if I can?"

Irving laughed nervously. "Let's just forget it. Here are the newspapers."

"There's no rush. Me and the kid are finished for the night. So look, Irving, is it your wife or you with the problem?"

"Well, I...heh, heh...I don't know."

"Well, can you get hard at least?"

"What? Sure, I can."

"Good. Can you come?"

"Sure, I can come."

"So what is it?"

"It's, uh...heh, heh...well, like, you know, sometimes I want to come another way, sort of, heh, heh, and it doesn't seem to work."

"Ahhh," said John, the light dawning on him. "You mean orally, right?"

"Yeah."

"She won't suck you off, is that it?"

"Listen, don't say that about my wife!"

"Who's saying anything? I'm just asking a simple question."

"She tries to, but I can't come." There. It was said. He felt both embarrassed and relieved. Despite the cool night air, he felt flushed and sweaty. Now he wished John would admit he couldn't do anything for him and just leave.

"Describe to me exactly how you're doing it."

"What're you, a sex counselor or something?"

"Listen, I know a thing or two. I been around. Come on, tell me. As long as we've come this far, we might as well get it all out in the open."

So Irving described in precise detail how Dolly would attempt to suck him off from on top.

John shook his head. "No wonder. Don't you know that's the hardest way to do it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Boy, oh, boy, Irving, you got a lot to learn, no offense. Listen to me. You got to do it different or your wife won't be able to hold out. What you do is this. You listening now?"

"Yeah," said Irving, who felt foolish but also excited at the prospect of having a great secret revealed to him.

"You lie side by side, see, and your wife just moves down to your cock, okay?"

"You mean like sixty-nine?"

"No! You're not reversed! She's got your cock in front of her and you got nothing in front of you. You with me now?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Now, maybe she wants a pillow under head to be comfortable. Depends. As long as her neck don't get stiff, okay? You let her line herself up with your cock at whatever angle is most comfortable for both of you, okay?"

"Okay."

"She should probably be just a little bit up from your cock so that it's aimed just a bit upwards, but you decide."

"Okay."

"All right, now, you do all the moving, and she doesn't move at all. That's why she has to get comfortable to begin with, okay?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, now, she should use both hands to squeeze your cock as it's going in and out, but mostly she should squeeze on the out-stroke, not the in-stroke. And she also has to keep it wet so you can slide easy. You can use a little vegetable oil, but not baby oil or shit like that because it's going to go in her mouth, okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay, so you move at your own speed. You control that, and if you have to pause for a second, no problem, okay? That's normal, to pause now and then. They call that a plateau."

"Yeah, right, I know."

"So basically that's all there is to it. You do all the moving, and if she's in a comfortable position, she don't get stiff in her neck or jaw."

"Did you learn all this in a book or something?"

"Book? I don't read books. I went to the third grade in Armenia."

"Armenia?"

"Yeah. *Books. Jesus.*" He shook his head. "You want to know anything important, ask an Armenian."

"Oh."

"So you got it straight now?"

"I think so."

"Try it." He picked up the bundle of papers. "If it still don't work, call the company in the morning and leave a message for me."

"That's okay, I don't think it'll be necessary."

"Me neither. Now, go on back and give it a try." He shook Irving's hand. "Nice to have met you, Irving."

"Thanks. Same here."

And John took the newspapers away, threw them on the back of the truck, and got in. The truck drove off. Irving stood in the driveway for a few moments not quite believing

the kind of conversation that had just taken place.

He went back inside, turned off the outside light, and returned to his bedroom, where his wife lay in bed watching a talk show.

"Dolly, do you mind if we try something? I know you're tired, but this will be easier. I just realized we've been doing it wrong."

Dolly turned off the TV, sighed, gave him a smile more of sympathy than of passion, and turned the blanket aside for him.

And Irving followed John's instructions exactly -- including the vegetable oil -- and the Miracle of Miracles happened!

He lay in bed realizing that the World, that Life itself had changed radically. When he looked up at the ceiling, he imagined a big "W," representing "Win," being inscribed in his Cosmic Record. He was profoundly happy for the first time in his life. All the lettuces and police officers and complaints about soap and other little defeats were swept away, and he realized now how trivial they really were. There would be no more stupid battles.

He got up and went into the kitchen, ostensibly to put the vegetable oil back in the cupboard. But he really wanted to just walk around because he was so excited. He looked out of the windows, seeing only the mundane nighttime street and its houses. In the bedroom behind him, a click signified a light going out as his wife got ready to fall asleep.

It was about 1:30 a.m.

He went to the front door, clad in his bathrobe, and stepped outside onto the front steps. He breathed the cool, sweet air, listened to the crickets chirping, and looked up at the stars. All the sleeping people in the darkened houses didn't know it, but Irving Miller had finally rejoined the human race as a member in full standing.

"I can do it now," he said aloud to the street.

"*I can do it now*," he repeated a little louder.

From across the street, the neighbor's dog responded.

"Arf! Arf!" it barked at him. "Arf! Arf!"

About The Author

Crad Kilodney is the only writer in the world who not only publishes his own books but also sells them on the street as his sole occupation. He first appeared on the streets of Toronto in 1978 with a collection of stories published as a special issue of the American literary magazine *Lowlands Review*. The following year, he founded his own imprint, Charnel House. Two other collections have been published by Virgo Press and Coach House Press.

Kilodney was born in the Borough of Queens, New York City, in 1948 and graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in astronomy. He abandoned his scientific career after a few months in favor of a literary one. He has lived in Canada since 1973. His stories and other writings have appeared in about 70 magazines and anthologies in the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain, including the distinguished *Pushecart Prize* anthology. He has no formal training in literature or creative writing.

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"Kilodney is a mad scientist/sociologist working with the world as his laboratory." -- *Small Press Review*

"Painfully funny, delightfully insane." -- W.P. Kinsella